

# Origin Story from Sumer

## Introduction

The people of Sumer lived in ancient Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. This region is located in what is now the Middle East. Life in Mesopotamia was difficult since the climate was hot and dry and the rivers flooded at unpredictable times. The Sumerians, however, developed canals for irrigation and sailing vessels to transport their goods. They also developed the oldest written language in existence and invented the wheel. This origin story was translated from fragments of ancient clay tablets, found in the ruins of a Sumerian library.

## Origin Story

In the beginning, there were the freshwater and the saltwater seas. Many Gods lived in these seas. Among them was the God of Wisdom. His son Marduk (pronounced mar-DOOK) would become the greatest of all the Gods. Marduk's father was so proud of him that he gave him twice the powers of the other Gods. Marduk had four eyes, four ears, and two mouths.

But Marduk was spoiled by his father's adoration, and he became mischievous. He spied upon the other Gods, spread gossip about them, and played vicious practical jokes.

A number of the Gods grew tired of Marduk's behavior.

"We have no peace when he is around us," one God complained to his friends. "It is time we rid ourselves of this nuisance! Let us go to Tiamat (pronounced TEE-ah-mat), the Goddess of the sea. She also has been annoyed by Marduk's pranks. Perhaps she can suggest a way to kill him."

Tiamat listened to the Gods as they listed their complaints about Marduk. "It will be difficult to kill this boy," she told them. "His father protects him. And Marduk has twice the powers of the rest of us. I shall have to create an army of monsters to destroy him."

"Do whatever has to be done," one of the Gods replied.

So Tiamat began creating an army of monsters to destroy Marduk. She made huge fire-breathing dragons, giants with scorpionlike tails, scaly snakes with sharp horns on their heads, and snarling, rabid dogs with wings. When her army was complete, she marched toward the palace of the Gods.

The Gods who had not conspired with Tiamat were in the palace, and they saw the army approach. "We cannot defeat such horrible creatures!" one God wailed.

Marduk was summoned, and the Gods told him that he would have to fight the terrible army alone.

"Of course I will fight!" Marduk replied. "However, if I am successful, you must promise to make me king of the Gods." Reluctantly, the other Gods agreed.



Marduk prepared for the battle. He armed himself with one bow, one arrow, and a net. Then he set out in his chariot.

When he saw Tiamat's army of monsters, he momentarily lost his courage. "How can I defeat such fearsome creatures?" he thought. But a plan quickly formed in his mind. "I must trick Tiamat into fighting me alone. If she is killed, the army she has created will run in terror. Perhaps if I insult her, she will become furious and carelessly attack me without her protective guards."

"Hey, Tiamat, you cringing coward!" he taunted. "Come out from behind those disgusting creatures of yours! Are you afraid of a mere boy? You, who claim to be a Goddess?"

His plan worked. Tiamat was furious and rushed out from behind her army. She confronted Marduk alone.

"You nasty brat!" she shouted. "How dare you insult me, the Goddess of the sea!"

Just as Tiamat shouted at him, Marduk hurled his net over her. She struggled to escape. "Do you think this flimsy net can hold me?" she shrieked. "I shall swallow you whole!" And she opened her huge mouth to eat Marduk.

But Marduk raised his bow and aimed his one arrow down her throat. The arrow shot through Tiamat's mouth, pierced her heart, and cut her in two.

"From your body, Tiamat, I shall create my new kingdom," Marduk announced. He took one half of her body and created the sky. From the other half, he created the earth. Marduk looked at the world he created, and he was pleased with it. He decided to populate it with new creatures.

"I will create beings who will not have the power to rise up against the Gods," Marduk stated. "They will not live forever, but will eventually die. I will call these creatures 'humans.'"



- Why did the Gods want to kill Marduk?
- What preparations did Tiamat make before attacking Marduk?
- How did Marduk trick Tiamat into fighting him by herself?
- What did Marduk do so that humans would never be powerful enough to challenge the Gods?